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SUBJECT: DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT: TIRANA RESPONSE

REF: A) STATE 86401 B) TIRANA 408 C) TIRANA 409

¶1. Summary: Below is Post's response to ref A request concerning information on the Albanian diaspora. End summary.

¶2. Albania is a country of approximately 3.6 million comprised of ethnic Albanians (95 per cent), Greeks (3 per cent) and other groups, such as Roma (Gypsies), Serbs, and Macedonians. While Albania was isolated from the rest of the world from 1955 to 1991 during the communist period, when communism fell, the country opened up and tens of thousands of Albanians living in Albania left the country. One United Nations estimate states that one in five Albanians left the country between 1990 and 2001. For many years, there have been scores of ethnic Albanians living outside Albania in neighboring countries, such as Macedonia, Greece and Kosovo. According to various sources, over one million Albanians live in Turkey, over 500,000 in Macedonia, 440,000 in Greece, 200,000 in both Italy and the UK, and more than 100,000 in both the U.S. and Germany, with nearly as many in Switzerland, and about 30,000 in Montenegro. Albanians commonly joke that more Albanians live outside Albania than in it.

¶3. These various groups range from newly arrived immigrants to individuals and families who have lived in other countries for decades, if not longer. They are often recognizable in their various communities and have distinct political representation in some countries such as Macedonia. Some of these groups at times have relationships with entities in Albania. For example in 2001, when fighting involving an ethnic Albanian separatist movement erupted in neighboring Macedonia, the GOA supported greater rights for the Albanian minority but condemned the rebels' violent tactics.

There are other more formal networks such as the National Albanian American Council (NAAC), founded in 1996, which seeks to advocate for Albanians and promote cooperation, peace, and democratization in the Balkans. The regional focus that NAAC has reflects the fact that ethnic Albanians are spread throughout the Balkan Peninsula. One of the programs NAAC has is the Hope Fellowship Program, which is conducted in conjunction with USAID. Through this program, individuals from Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania participate in study visits to the U.S. to learn more about advocacy, democratization and other issues. The program targets people between 18-45 years old, different ethnic groups, and women in government institutions and/or civil society leaders. Its website is www.naac.org. Other such networks include GLOBALB and the NGO MJAFT!, which has a network in London. MJAFT!'s network in London has less than 50 official members, however it holds events for the diaspora in London that attract many other ethnic Albanians.

¶4. As Albanian families are large in size, in many cases Albanians abroad still have many relatives remaining in Albania, thus keeping ties relatively close. In some cases the diaspora groups participate in politics through fundraising in their current country of residence. Remittances represent the largest influx of foreign capital into the Albanian economy. According to data Post has received, remittances amounted to 9.2 per cent of GDP in 2008, although for the first quarter of 2009, remittances were down eight per cent from 2008 to 196 million euro. Some remittances finance construction and other business activities, but most are used to help poor families meet immediate needs. Generally, remittances

seem to be the largest impact that the diaspora has on Albania. See refs B and C for a closer look at remittances.

¶15. The diaspora community does invest in Albania, although it is difficult to determine the scale of investment. Certainly Albanians living abroad contribute financially to help relatives start businesses and build homes, which also creates jobs indirectly by increasing demands for other products. The future potential for diaspora investment should be positive, however given the investment climate, particularly with respect to private property, potential investors are often scared away by what they (correctly, in many cases) see as a less than ideal place to invest money.

¶16. The diaspora has some contact with the GOA officially. The GOA, with its Brain Gain Program, co-sponsored by the UNDP, works to engage the diaspora to contribute to Albania's development, by seeking ways to entice qualified professionals to return to Albania.

The program is also creating an online database in which people can join and formulating GOA policy toward the diaspora. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also has an office of Diaspora Affairs that helps to coordinate policy. A number of Albanian-Americans are also active in Albanian politics, with at least two serving in the Albanian parliament. At least two other Albanian-Americans ran unsuccessfully for Parliament in the June, 2009 parliamentary elections. One of those candidates currently serves as General Director for the state-owned electricity generator

¶17. The diaspora community does not seem to contribute significantly in the fields of engineering, medical and educational institution building, conflict resolution, peace building, and health. There are individuals and groups that may work in this field, however. Job opportunities in scientific fields are scant as is often the salary, making it hard for people with advanced degrees in the sciences to return and earn a comparable living to that in other countries. In civil society and democratization, again the diaspora seems to play more of a financial role than an advocacy role. During the recent election period for example, leading politicians of all stripes traveled overseas to gain money and promote awareness.

¶18. Post's POC for this issue is Michael W. Gray, Political Officer, email graymw3@state.gov, cell: 355-4-68-403-9059, office 355-4-224-7285 x3166.

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